

Mortification Of Sin: By John Owen

CHAPTER 11

‘Five More Directions for dealing with a Disquieting Sin’

Rectitude: Moral uprightness

Issue: the result

Extenuation :an excuse, a justification, something that lessens the guilt of something.

Aggravation :a thing that makes some condition worse

Fomes: is a Latin word meaning tinder, or kindling, the stuff which quickly may be ignited into fire. What Owen means is that there lives in us, because of our fallen nature, plenty of material that just needs the spark of temptation etc. to ignite it into grievous sin.

Expedient :a means of attaining an end, in this case a method for dealing with the weakness of the flesh and our natural tendency to sin.

In this chapter Owen outlines five more directions in addition to the his two previous ones in Chapters 9 & 10. In chapter 9 he directed us to ‘consider the dangerous symptoms of any disquieting and troubling sin’, in chapter 10, he directed us to ‘get a clear sense of the guilt of the sin’, and now he gives directions three through to seven.

This is my third direction:-- Load thy conscience with the guilt of it. Not only consider that it hath a guilt, but load thy conscience with the guilt of its actual eruptions and disturbances.

Since there is so much in this chapter I will merely outline the various point by giving Owen’s headings, or summary paragraphs, and give explanatory notes in italics where necessary.

Owen means by ‘load’ what we might express as ‘fill your thoughts’, or ‘give careful and detailed attention to’. Use God’s method of understanding the guilt of sin, which is to consider the guilt of sin in general and then in particular.

1. General considerations of the guilt of sin to load your conscience with.

(1.) Charge thy conscience with the guilt which appears in it from the rectitude and holiness of the law. Bring the holy law of God into thy conscience, lay thy corruption to it, pray that thou mayst be affected with it. Consider the holiness, spirituality, fiery severity, inwardness, absoluteness of the law, and see how thou canst stand before it.

[1.] Tell thy conscience that it cannot manage any evidence to the purpose that thou art free from the condemning power of sin, whilst thy unmortified lust

lies in thy heart; so that, perhaps, the law may make good its plea against thee for a full dominion, and then thou art a lost creature. *What Owen means is that we must not convince ourselves that all is well with our souls and we are free from the condemning power of sin if we have an unmortified sin.*

[2.] Whatever be the issue, yet the law hath commission from God to seize upon transgressors wherever it find them, and so bring them before his throne, where they are to plead for themselves. This is thy present case; the law hath found thee out, and before God it will bring thee. If thou canst plead a pardon, well and good; if not, the law will do its work. *Owen is urging us to realise that we will be condemned by the law if found as sinners before the law.*

[3.] However, this is the proper work of the law, to discover sin in the guilt of it, to awake and humble the soul for it, to be a glass to represent sin in its colours; and if thou deniest to deal with it on this account, it is not through faith, but through the hardness of thy heart and the deceitfulness of sin. *Owen urges us to use the law as it was meant to be used, as a means of grace given by God so that we may know what sin is and flee from it to Christ.*

(2.) Bring thy lust to the gospel, -- not for relief, but for farther conviction of its guilt; look on Him whom thou hast pierced, and be in bitterness. Say to thy soul, "What have I done? What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace have I despised and trampled on! Is this the return I make to the Father for his love, to the Son for his blood, to the Holy Ghost for his grace? Do I thus requite the Lord? Have I defiled the heart that Christ died to wash, that the blessed Spirit hath chosen to dwell in?

2. Particular considerations of the guilt of sin to load your conscience with.

(1.) Consider the infinite patience and forbearance of God towards thee in particular. Consider what advantages he might have taken against thee, to have made thee a shame and a reproach in this world, and an object of wrath for ever; how thou hast dealt treacherously and falsely with him from time to time, flattered him with thy lips, but broken all promises and engagements, and that by the means of that sin thou art now in pursuit of; and yet he hath spared thee from time to time, although thou seemest boldly to have put it to the trial how long he could hold out. And wilt thou yet sin against him? wilt thou yet weary him, and make him to serve with thy corruptions?

(2.) How often hast thou been at the door of being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, and by the infinite rich grace of God hast been recovered to communion with him again?

Hast thou not found grace decaying; delight in duties, ordinances, prayer and meditation, vanishing; inclinations to loose careless walking, thriving; and they who before were entangled, almost beyond recovery? Hast thou not found thyself engaged in such ways, societies, companies, and that with delight, as God abhors? And wilt thou venture any more to the brink of hardness?

(3.) All God's gracious dealings with thee, in providential dispensations, deliverances, afflictions, mercies, enjoyments, all ought here to take place. *Owen*

means that we should consider that all of our lives have been ordered by God for our good, and should we continue to rebel against him in sin?

FOURTHLY. Being thus affected with thy sin, in the next place get a constant longing, breathing after deliverance from the power of it. Suffer not thy heart one moment to be contented with thy present frame and condition. Longing desires after any thing, in things natural and civil, are of no value or consideration, any farther but as they incite and stir up the person in whom they are to a diligent use of means for the bringing about the thing aimed at. In spiritual things it is otherwise. Longing, breathing, and panting after deliverance is a grace in itself, that hath a mighty power to conform the soul into the likeness of the thing longed after.

Assure thyself, unless thou longest for deliverance thou shalt not have it.

The FIFTH direction is, -- Consider whether the distemper with which thou art perplexed be not rooted in thy nature, and cherished, fomented, and heightened from thy constitution. A proneness to some sins may doubtless lie in the natural temper and disposition of men. In this case consider, --

1. This is not in the least an extenuation of the guilt of thy sin..... David reckons his being shapen in iniquity and conception in sin as an aggravation of his following sin, not a lessening or extenuation of it. That thou art peculiarly inclined unto any sinful distemper is but a peculiar breaking out of original lust in thy nature, which should peculiarly abase and humble thee. *Owen wants us to make sure we do not excuse our sin by saying, 'I can't help it, it's just the way I'm made'. He says that while our natural weakness is there it is not an excuse but something that just makes our sin worse - the result ought to be we feel very humbled at our nature.*

2. That thou hast to fix upon on this account, in reference to thy walking with God, is that so great an advantage is given to sin, as also to Satan, by this thy temper and disposition, **that without extraordinary watchfulness, care, and diligence, they will assuredly prevail against thy soul.** *This natural tendency to sin must be viewed as highlighting the necessity of extreme watchfulness and diligence against temptations etc., it only takes a spark.*

3. For the mortification of any distemper so rooted in the nature of a man, unto all other ways and means already named or farther to be insisted on, **there is one expedient peculiarly suited; this is that of the apostle, 1 Cor. 9:27, "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection."**

Rome of course has abused this expedient and made it the whole of mortification (see early chapters of book), so Owen is careful to remind us of some limitations of bodily subjection.

- (1.) That the outward weakening and impairing of the body be not looked upon as a thing good in itself, or that any mortification doth consist therein,
- (2.) That the means whereby this is done, -- namely, by fasting and watching, and the like, -- be not looked on as things that in themselves, and by virtue of their own power, can produce true mortification of any sin; for if they would, sin might be mortified without any help of the Spirit in any unregenerate person in the world.

The SIXTH direction is, -- Consider what occasions, what advantages thy distemper hath taken to exert and put forth itself, and watch against them all.

Consider what ways, what companies, what opportunities, what studies, what businesses, what conditions, have at any time given, or do usually give, advantages to thy distempers, and set thyself heedfully against them all. Men will do this with respect unto their bodily infirmities and distempers. The seasons, the diet, the air that have proved offensive shall be avoided. Are the things of the soul of less importance? Know that he that dares to dally with occasions of sin will dare to venture upon wickedness. *Owen refers the reader to another of his works 'On Temptation', well worth a read as a companion to this present work.*

The SEVENTH direction is, -- Rise mightily against the first actings of thy distemper, its first conceptions; suffer it not to get the least ground. Do not say, "Thus far it shall go, and no farther." If it have allowance for one step, it will take another. It is impossible to fix bounds to sin. It is like water in a channel, -- if it once break out, it will have its course. Its not acting is easier to be compassed than its bounding.

Therefore doth James give that gradation and process of lust, chap 1:14,15, that we may stop at the entrance.

To use another phrase 'nip sin in the bud or it will blossom into great sin'.

Questions for thought and discussion.

- Owen clearly believes that both the Law and the Gospel have a role in fighting indwelling sin and mortifying it. Explain how we are to use each.
- How should God's continual kindness and mercy encourage us to mortify sin?
- Why is it so important to desire to be delivered from the power of sin, to be delivered from its power?
- Why is it so important to understand your 'natural' tendency to one or more sins?
- What aspects of our being, personality etc. can we use (wrongly) as excuses for our sin?
- Why is it so important to deal with sin when it first appears as it were? And why do we not do so sometimes but let it continue to grow?